

A

S E R M O N

PREACHED

AT THE CHAPEL ROYAL.

S. E. R. M. O. N.

PREACHED

AT THE CHURCH OF ST. ROYAL.



Ann. 23

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S E R M O N

P R E A C H E D

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A S H - W E D N E S D A Y

M.DCC.LXX.IX.

R. Lowth

(Lowth)

BY ROBERT LORD BISHOP OF LONDON,

DEAN OF HIS MAJESTY'S CHAPELS.

L O N D O N:

Printed by J. N I C H O L S,

For J. D O D S L E Y in Pall-mall, and T. C A D E L L in the Strand.

M.DCC.LXX.IX.

S E R M O N

PREACHED

AT THE CHANCEL ROYAL

OF

STAMES GALLA C

ON

A S H - W E S D A Y



M.D.

BY ROBERT LORD BISHOP OF LONDON

DEAN OF HIS MAJESTY'S CHAPEL ROYAL

L O N D O N

Printed by J. N. [illegible]

For J. Dodsley, in Pall-mall, and W. A. [illegible] in the Strand

M.DCC.LXXIX

TO THE REVEREND THE CLERGY,

AND TO THE INHABITANTS,

OF THE DIOCESE

OF LONDON,

THIS DISCOURSE

IS RESPECTFULLY ADDRESSED,

BY THEIR AFFECTIONATE BROTHER,

AND FAITHFUL HUMBLE SERVANT,

R. LONDON.

TO THE REVEREND THE CLERGY

AND TO THE INHABITANTS

OF THE DIOCESE

OF LONDON

THIS DISCOURSE

IS RESPECTFULLY ADDRESSED

BY THEIR AFFECTIONATE BROTHER

AND FELLOW MINISTERS SERVANT

R. LONDON

LUKE XIII. 1, 2, 3.

THERE WERE PRESENT AT THAT SEASON SOME, THAT TOLD HIM OF THE GALILEANS, WHOSE BLOOD PILATE HAD MINGLED WITH THEIR SACRIFICES. AND JESUS ANSWERING SAID UNTO THEM; SUPPOSE YE, THAT THESE GALILEANS WERE SINNERS ABOVE ALL THE GALILEANS, BECAUSE THEY SUFFERED SUCH THINGS? I TELL YOU, NAY: BUT EXCEPT YE REPENT, YE SHALL ALL LIKEWISE PERISH.

THIS tragical event was related to Jesus as he was teaching the people at Jerusalem. The persons who relate it seem to have been possessed with the opinion, that this terrible destruction was a manifest instance of Divine Judgement executed upon these Galileans for their enormous wickedness; which probably they were the more ready to entertain, as the Jews of Jerusalem generally despised and hated the Galileans, malevolence being apt to have a great influence in such conclusions: and they seem to relate it to him, out of an ill-natured curiosity of hearing his remarks upon it, and in expectation of having their sentiments confirmed by him; supposing, that he would enlarge upon the crimes of those miserable men, and display the justice and the terror of God's vengeance exemplified in their destruction. Instead of this, our Saviour, who took every opportunity of instructing and admonishing his hearers, corrects their uncharitable and mistaken notions, and warns them, instead of being busied in judging others, to judge themselves, and reflect upon their own sins; their own sins in particular, and the accumulated guilt of their

their nation; and to make the proper use of the chastisements, which God inflicted upon others, while he spared them no less deserving punishment, as an argument for amendment and reformation, that they might avert God's wrath by repentance. "Suppose ye, that these Galileans were sinners above all the Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, Nay: but except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish."

Let us consider some of the reasons, upon which we may presume this determination of our Blessed Saviour to be founded; That we are not warranted to infer from great and signal calamities any great and uncommon wickedness in the sufferers.

It is not to be denied, that God hath sometimes, and upon extraordinary occasions, punished notorious offenders in such a remarkable manner, as left little room to doubt, that their destruction was his immediate work. But examples of this sort, taken from the history of the Israelites, which abounds with them, are not to be applied to the present purpose, nor do they properly belong to this question. Beside his universal character of Creator and Lord, God bore to them a peculiar relation by the particular covenant which he had entered into with them. He had chosen them as his own nation, his peculiar people, his temporal subjects: he became their King and Governor: he resided among them visibly: he ruled them in person, in their public and national capacity, according to the law which he had given them; which, being enforced by the sanctions of temporal life and death, could not in all cases be put in execution, but by the infliction of temporal judgements from the hand of God their supreme Governor. However, even under this extraordinary dispensation, in respect of private persons, the interposition of the hand of God was not commonly observable; and though national

tional prosperity and adversity was always proportionable to national obedience and disobedience to God's laws ; yet Solomon remarked in his time, of the general course of Providence respecting individuals, " that all things came alike to all ; that there was one event " to the righteous, and to the wicked ; and that no man knew " either love or hatred," whether he himself, or any other person, was in the favour or under the displeasure of God, " by all that was " before him *."

In regard also to the common course of things under God's universal providence, consider, I beseech you, the state of past or of present times : have those, who have been most remarkably successful, who have had the greatest share of power and riches and other advantages, been as remarkably conspicuous for their piety and virtue ? Is the exact observance of all the rules of morality, and all the duties of religion, a sure and infallible method of rising and prospering in the world, or even of avoiding want, and distress, and misery ? So far from it, that the afflictions of the righteous, and the prosperity of the wicked, have been matter of complaint and offence in every age, and have tempted weak minds to doubt of a superintending Providence. General experience therefore teaches us, that as remarkable success in the world is no proof of superior virtue, so great misfortunes are no argument of uncommon guilt.

Further, this supposition of temporal judgements, frequently executed upon private persons, is not agreeable to the known plan of Providence, nor even consistent with it.

If the good things of this life were proposed to us as the proper rewards of virtue ; and want, pain, and misery, were threatened as the just punishments of vice ; then might we affirm, that the eminently wretched were thus visited in consequence of some great and

* Eccles. ix. 1, 2.

enormous crime. But this is not the case : our life here is a state of probation, and this world only a passage to eternity ; and God places us here to try us, and to exercise us ; to give us the opportunity and the means of preparing ourselves for an endless life, and of obtaining in it a state of happiness, and escaping a state of misery, infinitely exceeding all the pleasures and pains of this world. Wealth, greatness, honours, pleasures, are so far from being proposed as the rewards of righteousness, that they are represented as temptations and snares the most dangerous to virtue : and the distresses and afflictions of this life are so far from being described, as marks of God's displeasure, and signs of wrath in all cases, that we are bid to look upon them as matter of joy, and as in the end conducive to our greatest happiness. Our Blessed Saviour pronounceth " Wo to " the rich and the luxurious ; to the poor, to the hungry, to the " afflicted, to the persecuted, Blessing." We are directed to have respect in all our actions to the rewards and punishments of another life ; and in this life to look upon those things only as really good or evil, which promote or hinder the work of our eternal salvation.

Besides, were these the proper rewards of virtue and punishments of vice, how could they be applied and administered consistently with the present order and constitution of things established by the will of God ? We are here all of us knit together in the bands of society ; no man stands single and alone ; our fortunes and interests, our happinesses and miseries, are linked together ; and what greatly concerns one must in some degree affect a multitude. It often happens, that the prosperity, the welfare, the subsistence, of many depend upon one : if this one be a proper object of the wrath of God, shall the whole innocent family, shall his blameless wife and children, shall his relations and dependents, however just and pious,

be

be involved in his ruin, and share the punishment of his guilt? Or shall the right-aiming thunderbolts, when they go abroad, pick and sort out the righteous from among the wicked, and set the latter apart for destruction? Shall the earthquake, commissioned to swallow up some high-vised city, have particular orders to spare the dwellings of the ten righteous that are in it? Shall the destroying angel be commanded to pass over the door of the good man; nor the pestilence be suffered to breathe upon him, nor famine, nor fire, nor sword to assail him, while a thousand fall beside him, and ten thousand at his right hand? This, you may say, is possible with God. True: but it is not agreeable to the established course of Providence. God acts ordinarily by natural causes, and not by miracles. Our Saviour has stated this case in the most clear and convincing manner, and has told us, how all these things will be finally adjusted, and the proper separation made with unerring rectitude, in his excellent parable of the tares. "A man sowed good seed in his field: but when the wheat sprung up, there appeared tares among it: and the servants of the householder said unto him, Wilt thou, that we go and gather up the tares? But he said, Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them. Let them both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them; but gather the wheat into my barn *."

Lastly, the several ends and designs of God's visiting men with afflictions are very different from what this opinion supposes.

Human misery is indeed the consequence of sin; and moral evil is the original cause of natural evil in this world. But as this present state is a state of trial, not of retribution, there is no necessity that na-

* Matt. xiii. 24—30.

tural evil should be dispensed in exact proportion to moral: it is enough, that this will be finally adjusted with the exactest equity at the great day of judgement. In the mean time God administers and dispenses the several evils of this life by different measures, and in various ways, as best may answer his wise, his righteous, his good and merciful designs: to humble us; to check our pride and sufficiency; to awaken us out of a state of carelessness and inconsideration; to bring us to repentance; to wean our hearts from an immoderate fondness of the pleasures of the world, and its uncertain and transitory enjoyments; to try, to improve, and to perfect our virtues; and to make some chosen persons eminent and edifying examples of constancy and resignation to the rest of mankind.

But granting, that great afflictions are chastisements of sin; yet ought we not to conclude from thence, that the unhappy sufferers are more wicked than others: or that we, who escape, are more righteous than they. We all deserve punishment; and God as a tender father may correct them, and warn us. As a warning, the sufferings of the eminently righteous might have a better effect, than the punishment of the notoriously wicked: in the latter case, our conscience might assure us, or we might flatter ourselves, that we were not like them; but in the former, we could not but ask ourselves, “if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and “the sinner appear; and if judgement begin at the house of God, “what shall be the end of those who obey not the Gospel?” If God should be extreme to mark what is done amiss, who may abide it? He may in justice and in mercy punish his most faithful servants; if with severity, yet not beyond their deserts: while he withholds his hand from others more deserving of punishment; and tries, if by such warnings, if by forbearance and long-suffering, if by
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the riches of his goodness, he may lead them to repentance. Upon the whole then, we have no reason to conclude of those, who are oppressed with great calamities, that they are sinners above all others, because they suffer such things.

But though our Blessed Saviour disapproves of and rebukes this presumptuous practice of interpreting God's visitation of particular persons, and uncharitably inferring from signal calamities great wickedness in the sufferers; yet at the same time he threatens the whole Nation with temporal judgements of the like kind; unless they should avert God's wrath by repentance: 'I tell you, Nay, they are not greater sinners than others; but except ye repent, ye shall all, the whole Nation of you, for your general depravity, for your manifold crimes and provocations, for your contempt of the forbearance and long-suffering of God, ye shall all perish in like manner; and your destruction shall be so signally marked with the hand of God, that all men shall see, that it is his work, and that the Lord himself hath done it.' All this, as the event shewed, was implied in our Blessed Saviour's admonition to the Jews.

"The most High ruleth in the kingdom of men; he giveth it to whomsoever he will; he putteth down one, and setteth up another; he increaseth the nations, and destroyeth them; he enlargeth the nations, and straiteneth them again." On the grounds of reason and experience, and from our notions of the wisdom and justice of God, we may be allowed to observe a more equal providence dispensed in the fates of kingdoms, than in the affairs of individuals. The cases are widely different; and the same reasons, motives, and ends, do not hold in both. Kingdoms and nations, as such, are beings of the present world, and they are obnoxious to the judgements of God in this life only: therefore the

the counsels of God with regard to them may be governed by other rules; and we are warranted to estimate their prosperity and adversity by measures different from those, by which we ought to judge of the merits and demerits of private persons. The language of Scripture is in this respect agreeable to the universal testimony of History; 'That righteousness exalteth a nation, but wickedness is not only a reproach, but in the end sure destruction to any people.' It hath pleased God so to constitute the nature and order of things, that the one follows the other by certain consequence; as well as sometimes also by his peculiar decree.

The Scripture gives us many instances of the extraordinary interposition of God in some remarkable cases. Thus he destroyed the old world with a flood, because it was full of violence, and all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth. Thus likewise he overthrew in his just wrath the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, because their sin was very grievous. As soon as the iniquity of the Amorites was full*, the Israelites received a divine commission to destroy them. And Moses speaks the common sentiments of mankind, when he tells the Israelites, what hath been fully justified in the event, 'that when the stranger, that shall come from a far country, shall see the plagues of their land like the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah; even all the nations that shall see it, shall say, Wherefore hath the Lord done thus unto this land? then men shall say, Because they had forsaken the covenant of the Lord their God.' †

Agreeable to this was our Saviour's admonition to the Jews in the text; "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." It was a charitable and gracious warning, and at the same time a prophetic denunciation of the just vengeance of God hanging over them. In a few years

* Gen. xv. 16.

† Deut. xxix. 22—25.

afterwards,

afterwards, through their impenitence, they suffered more than these Galileans, or than those on whom the tower of Siloam fell, had suffered. It was not only a few of them that were slain while they were sacrificing, but the greatest part of the inhabitants of Judea, gathered together to celebrate the Passover, were shut up in Jerusalem by the Roman armies, and devoted to destruction: not only was their blood mingled with their sacrifices, but to the rage of the sword were added all the horrors of pestilence and famine: it was not only one tower that fell upon a few men, and slew them, but almost the whole nation was buried under the ruins of their walls, their city, and their temple; above a million of souls perished, and there was not one stone left upon another that was not thrown down.

Now, what our Lord said unto them, he saith to every exceedingly wicked and ungodly nation; "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." The method of God's acting in these cases, as far as we can infer it from the Holy Scriptures, seems to be this: he limits a time in his own secret counsels for the extension of his patience and long-suffering; he gives the objects of his wrath sufficient warnings to awaken them from their inconsiderate progress in wickedness, that they may appease his anger by repentance: of old he did it by his special messengers the Prophets; he doth it now by various remarkable dispensations of his providence, and by his revealed word, the standing declaration of his will. Thus he did in the days of Noah, who was then the preacher of righteousness, the messenger of God's threatened vengeance to a sinful world, in order to reclaim them: "My Spirit, saith God, shall not alway strive with man; yet his days," the space allowed him for repentance, "shall be a hundred and twenty years *". "Yet forty days, and Niniveh

* Gen. vi. 3, compare 1. Pet. iii. 19, 20.

"shall

“ shall be overthrown,” said the Prophet Jonah by the special command of God. “ And God saw the works of the people of Niniveh, “ that they turned from their evil way, and God repented him of “ the evil that he said he would do unto them; and he did it “ not” †. What time God hath determined upon this sinful nation, is sealed up among his hidden decrees. Let us consider, whether we are not approaching fast to the utmost term of his forbearance. Let us reflect upon the various warnings, which he hath given us from time to time in his past dealings with us; and which we have as little regarded, as the voice of his blessed Son, and of his holy Apostles, perpetually calling us to repentance.

While the Divine Judgements seem to be hanging immediately over our heads, let us consider these ways of God; and let us consider our own ways. Let us seriously apply these things to ourselves: let us search our own hearts, and impartially examine our state in respect of God, both particular and national, while the day of salvation lasteth, and there is yet room for repentance. Are we not a nation greatly distinguished by various deliverances and singular blessings, which God hath vouchsafed to us? have we shewed ourselves worthy of these blessings? have we not forgotten his mercies, despised his corrections, neglected his warnings, and made an ill use of his goodness? have we not abused wealth and prosperity to luxury and dissoluteness; turned civil liberty into licentiousness, and religious liberty into profaneness and impiety? are we not a people among whom the purest religion has very little influence; and the best laws can hardly be carried into execution? testifying upon all occasions an eager impatience of all restraint both religious and legal? Our excellent Constitution, the glory of modern policy, and the envy of the rest of the world, is it

† Jonah, iii. 4. 10.

not greatly weakened and rendered ineffectual by a general national depravity, by a decay of public spirit, and every virtuous principle? And this weakness of the Constitution do not the enemies of all order make a pretence, and use as an occasion, to endeavour, instead of restoring, totally to subvert it? Are there not many, whose study it has long been to introduce disorder and confusion, to encourage tumults and seditions; to destroy all rule and all authority, by traducing government, despising dominion, and speaking evil of dignities? by assuming visionary and impracticable principles, as the only true foundations of a free government, which tend to raise discontent in the people*; to harden some in actual rebellion, and to dispose others to follow their example? Is not a true sense of piety and religion very much lost among the rich; and industry, probity, and sobriety, as much decayed among the poor? hath not extravagance and dissipation taken possession of the great, and by the influence of their example descended far into the lower orders of men? whence distress of families, bankruptcies, frauds, forgeries, robberies, perjuries, self-murders, without number and without example? Is not the age peculiarly disgraced with frequent adulteries; and those among the higher ranks, of most extensive scandal, and most pernicious influence; in which one sex seems to have cast off all restraint of natural modesty, and both to have lost all sense of decency, faith, dignity, and honour? With all this load of guilt upon our heads, and the hand of God stretched out in vengeance over us;

* "As far as, in any instance, the operation of any cause comes in to restrain the power of Self-government, so far Slavery is introduced." Dr. Price, *Observations on Civil Liberty*. Sect. I. "The representation must be *complete*. No state, a *part* of which only is represented in the Legislature that governs it, is *self-governed*." *Additional Observations*, Sect. I. From which it follows, that a vast majority of the people of England, all that have no vote for Representatives in Parliament, are Slaves.

while the Lord God of Hosts calls us to weeping, and to mourning, and to baldness, and to girding with sackcloth; what is the demeanor of too many among us? Behold joy and gladness, mirth and festivity, eating and drinking;—let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die. “Shall I not visit for these things? saith the Lord; shall not my soul be avenged on such a nation as this?” Surely he will visit such a sinful people;—unless they repent, and turn from their evil ways. For these are the gracious terms, in which every denunciation of God’s wrath is made: his promises and his threatenings are always conditional; and the conditions are these, as he hath plainly declared them by his Prophet, universally, in respect to all the nations upon earth: “At what time I shall speak concerning a nation to build and to plant it; if it do evil in my sight, that it obey not my voice, then will I repent of the good, wherewith I said I would benefit them. And at what instant I shall speak concerning a nation to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it; if that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, then will I repent of the evil, which I thought to have done unto them*.”

Let us then seriously consider the moral and religious state of this nation; and as it is much to be feared, that the most favourable view of it will afford abundant matter for dreadful apprehensions; let us humble ourselves before God, and implore with prayer and confession, and above all with earnest repentance, his compassion and forbearance towards us: “for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and, if we turn unto him, will repent him of the evil,” which perhaps he hath already purposed to bring upon us. On this condition, let us approach the throne of grace with humble confidence; and let us intercede with intense sup-

* Jer. xviii. 7—10.

plication in behalf of our country. As individuals, of which this nation is composed, let us impartially consider, what share we ourselves have in the common guilt. Reformation must begin with particulars, and the several members must become sound, before the body can be restored to health. It is in the power of every one of us in some degree to contribute to the recovery of the whole, by amending a part, by giving one good citizen to the community. This if we heartily endeavour, we shall certainly save our own souls in the day of final retribution; we may perhaps save both ourselves and our country from impending wrath and present punishment. It may be that God will be gracious unto us: that He, who would have saved Sodom for the sake of ten righteous persons; and "Jerusalem, for the sake of but one in it, that had executed justice, "and sought the truth*," may yet avert the judgements that threaten this sinful nation. And may it please God by the influence of his Holy Spirit, so to move all our hearts, and to open our eyes, "that "we may know the things that belong to our peace; that we may "give glory to the Lord our God," by confession, repentance, and amendment, "before he cause darkness, and, while we look for light, "he turn it into the shadow of death."

* Jer. v. 1.

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